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### Variation Theory and the Reception of Chinese Literature in the English-speaking World

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**Volume 17 Issue 1 (March 2015) Article 6**

**Shunqing Cao,**

**"Variation Theory and the Reception of Chinese Literature in the English-speaking World"**

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Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 17.1 (2015)**

Thematic Issue ***The Study of Chinese Literature in the Anglophone World***. Ed. Shunqing Cao

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**Abstract:** In his article "Variation Theory and the Reception of Chinese Literature in the English-speaking World" Shunqing Cao introduces "variation theory" he developed and suggests that the framework can be applied in studying the dissemination and reception of Chinese literature in the English-speaking world. Cao argues that cultural and literary differences produce variations in literary exchanges among different cultures and variation theory concentrates on these variations. With unique perspectives on variation in translation, cultural misreading, and domestication, variation theory is a useful theoretical framework and methodology for the study of the reception of Chinese literature in the English-speaking world.

## Shunqing CAO

### Variation Theory and the Reception of Chinese Literature in the English-speaking World

In Chinese humanities scholarship and the study of literature the past several decades have seen a surge of work in various fields such as translation studies and translation itself, literary theory, the study of specific genres, the literature of a specific time period and authors, etc. While most this scholarship has been published as dissertations or monographs, there is also an increasing amount in the publication of articles in journals in China and abroad (for a survey of books published on the last ten years see, e.g., Wang, Miaomiao <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2370>>). This development of scholarship is tied to the promotion and support of the spread of Chinese culture and, for example, the *Global Database Resource on Chinese Culture* <<http://ddb.csdb.cn/index.do>> (中国文化海外传播动态数据库, founded in 2010) is a project co-established by the National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Science of China and Beijing Foreign Studies University: the database collects and stores information on the promotion of Chinese culture and literature outside of China. Additionally, overseas Chinese literature centers have been established at in many countries (i.e., the Confucius Institute). All these efforts manifest that on the one hand Chinese literature has been proved to be in a close tie with other parts of the world and on the other hand that scholars should do more than data collection and should further their exploration on the questions of "what" and "why": what works have been received? What difference(s) can be found between the reception by Chinese readership and the reception by readership in the English-speaking world? And why?

Chinese literature bears cultural heterogeneities which are not shared or at least may be misunderstood by receivers (readers, translators, scholars, critics, etc.) of a different culture. So the process of dissemination and reception of Chinese literature in the English-speaking world is a process of dealing with comparisons between Chinese and Western literatures, a process that is unfortunately filled with risks of variation such as misinterpretation, misreading, and cultural filtration. The phenomena of "heterogeneity" and "variation" have long been observed and discussed by some scholars. Ulrich Weisstein writes in his 1973 book *Comparative Literature and Literary Theory* that "in principle the comparatist should make no qualitative distinction between the active (giving) and passive (receiving) factors of an influence, for there is, or should be, as little disgrace in receiving as there is honor in giving. In most cases, at any rate, there is no direct lending or borrowing, and instances of literal imitation are probably rarer than more or less creative transmutations" (31). "Creative transmutation" is close to the concept of variation. Edward W. Said, in his 1978 book, *Orientalism*, points out that the image of the Orient often expressed by the Western scholarship as "irrational, depraved (fallen), child-like, 'different'" (40) is in fact a varied image reflecting merely a distorted Orient owing to Western hegemonic discourses. Several years later, Said presented his "traveling theory" which advocates critical consciousness and emphasizes the relation between theoretic variations and the change of space and time. Wai-lim Yip claims that Eastern literatures and Western literatures have their own distinctive cultural "models" which are different from each other, and if we view each other from the vantage point of our own "models" then misrepresentations of the other heterogeneous culture is unavoidable. Especially notable is the François Jullien, who pays attention to East-West cultural heterogeneity. Although with an attempt to approach Western thought from the outside—China as the "Other"—he has elaborated divides and distances between Chinese and Western thought. For Jullien heterogeneity is an important idea to stand against the so called "universality" of Western thought.

Chinese comparatists have also been sensitive to heterogeneity in a specific culture and literature. Daiyun Yue proposes the principle of "harmony without uniformity" for cultural communication. According to Yue, cultures are different from but related to each other in a multi- and intercultural world and only communication and negotiation can promise a common and harmonious development. She posits that in the last century comparative literature was restricted by the nation approach within while in the twenty-first century it will undoubtedly step onto the stage of East-West cultural communication characterized by heterogeneity and heterology (see Yue, Chen, Wang, Zhang 19). Tianzheng Xie discusses "creative treason" in the processes of translation and reception of literature claiming that the fundamental variation in cross-civilization literary exchange derives from heterogeneity and un-equivalence of languages. Yamin Hu believes that the spreading of a literary work is often not a

straight-line process and that there exists no possibility of maintaining a total equivalence between the original work and its reception in a different country be it the spreading of a foreign work at home or the spreading of a domestic work abroad, because variations often emerge from the processes of recipient's choice, assimilation or repulsion of a literary work (see Hu 67).

All these researches on heterogeneity and difference have built a solid foundation for variation theory. In 2005, I proposed the addition of "variation studies" to comparative literature studies claiming that comparative literature should get rid of the "to-see-sameness" model and broaden its own vision from the vantage point of variation (see Cao, *The Study*). With "crossing" and "literariness" as the two main cornerstones, variation studies refers to the study of patterns of intrinsic (literarily and culturally) difference and variability in literary exchanges between different countries, and of heterogeneity of literary categories among literatures that have no factual contacts with one another (see Cao and Li 82). Variation Theory has been given a thorough elaboration and exploration in my 2013 book *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*. My definition of variation theory is as follows: "Based on positivism, the study of variations of comparative literature is a new perspective in influence studies. It objectively studies the dynamic development of literature, penetrates the development of literature through variation, and combines positivism of the French school with the study of variation. This is the correction for defects of the French school, which enriches and supplements the model of influence studies and also greatly pushes the development of the theory of comparative literature" (Cao, *The Variation* 43).

In the West, the framework of comparative literature leaves little room for comparisons of literatures between heterogeneous cultures and thus comparability of Eastern and Western literary comparison often looks dubious. For instance, Weisstein wrote that "I will not deny that some parallel study is acceptable ... but I am hesitant to expand the parallel study on literatures of different civilizations, because, in my view, commonalities in thoughts, emotions, and imaginations can only be discovered consciously or unconsciously within a single civilization" (5). Weisstein's belief that it is not feasible to compare literatures of different civilizations is buttressed by the disciplinary framework of comparative literature in the West which, until recently, holds "sameness" between different national literatures as the core of comparison. The fact that influence study is based on "homogeneity" while parallel study is based on "analogy" manifests that any literary comparison for purposes beyond the "sameness" is not legitimate. To me, this is a typical prejudice and fallacy of the Western scholarship. According to variation theory it is difference or variation that makes the literary comparison between heterogeneous cultures possible and meaningful. And hence I posit that it is a framework to be used in the study of the dissemination and reception of Chinese literature in the English-speaking world.

Chinese literature travels into the English-speaking world mainly in the form of translated literature. Therefore, it is significant to study the phenomena of variation in translation. As we know, translation can never be "complete" because no matter how the translator represents or reproduces the source text in the target language, he/she must be restricted consciously or subconsciously by the norms of the target language and the reading habits or expectations of the target readers (thus resulting in variations). Many scholars have are aware and recognize the linguistic fact that Chinese is distinct from the Western alphabetic languages in writing, pronunciation, tone, grammar, etc. Florence Chia-ying Yeh depicts the heterogeneity of the Chinese language in terms of grammar claiming that Chinese enjoys great freedom. She points out that the Chinese language has no clear differentiation of such categories as tense, mood, voice, aspect, person, number, gender, logical connectives, and is very free on the syntactic level (see Yeh 115). Given the linguistic heterogeneity of the Chinese language, it is of course unimaginable to fulfill any translation task without considering the phenomena of variation involved. Since this kind of variation has much to do with language *per se*, it is not my concern in the study of dissemination and reception of Chinese literature. In terms of the dissemination of literature, translation does not merely mean linguistic translation; instead, it means cultural translation or cross-cultural translation.

Owing to cultural differences, Chinese literature will definitely meet cultural filters when entering the West, producing variations in aspects of form, content, and thought. Cultural filtering refers to the mechanism of selection, transformation, appropriation, and infiltration of culture-specific norms in a specific cultural context or tradition. Since one grows up in a specific space and time, each individual is branded with cultural "luggage" nurtured in a social-historical context and immersed in a psychology

specific to his/her own culture. This can be exemplified by the translation of some culture-loaded words in Chinese. For instance, the reception of Chinese classic 庄子 (*Zhuangzi*) (or *Chuang Tzu*) has to deal with the translation of some key words like "天" (*tian*) or "道" (*dao*). *tian* or *dao* is often interpreted in the West as "god" as in the Christian cultural tradition. This is a variation of the Chinese philosophical and cultural concept since there is an essential difference between "dao" and "god." As Guowei Wang points out, there is no *tian* in Western languages as there is no *god* in the Chinese language. The real meaning of *tian* in Chinese lies in somewhere between the material and the spirit (see Yao, Wang).

In addition, the translator's comprehension of the source text may decide his/her selection of strategies of translation, which, in some sense, will ultimately decide the reception of a literary work. Arthur Waley, who achieved both popular and scholarly reputations for his translations of Chinese literary classics, is viewed as the great transmitter of the literary cultures of China. In his translation of "庖丁解牛" ("Ting the Cook Cut Meat": an anecdote on cutting meat free from the bones of an ox), one of the important anecdotes in the Chinese classic *Zhuangzi*, we can find that he has in fact created a different version of the anecdote. Here is one version of the text: "虽然, 每至于族, 吾见其难为, 怵然为戒, 视为止, 行为迟. 动刀甚微, 謦然已解, 牛不知其死也, 如土委地. 提刀而立, 为之四顾, 为之踌躇满志, 善刀而藏之" ("Even so, there are always difficult places, and when I see rough going ahead, my heart offers proper respect as I pause to look deeply into it. Then I work slowly, moving my blade with in-creasing subtlety until—kerplop!—meat falls apart like a crumbling clod of earth. I then raise my knife and assess my work until I'm fully satisfied. Then I give my knife a good cleaning and put it carefully away" [Sam and Seaton 20]) and here is Waley's version: "However, one has only to look at an ordinary carver to see what a difficult business he finds it. One sees how nervous he is while making his preparations, how long he looks, how slowly he moves. Then after some small, niggling strokes of the knife, when he has done no more than detach a few stray fragments from the whole, and even that by dint of continually twisting and turning like a worm burrowing through the earth, he stands back, with his knife in his hand, helplessly gazing this way and that, and after hovering for a long time finally curses a perfectly good knife and puts it back in its case" (73). The moral of the anecdote of "Ting the Cook" is that no matter how complicated things in the world could be, they may become simple and clear because repeated practices can help one to grasp the law or *dao* behind them. However, we can easily recognize how far the image constructed in Waley's version is away from the original image of a highly skilled, confident cook with a sound knowledge of the natural *dao*. Waley's "Ting" is obviously a varied one owing to the misunderstanding of the Chinese wisdom of the relationship between nature and humans. This kind of variation is known as literary misreading.

Literary misreading results from various cultural filters, especially from translating or interpreting literary works of a heterogeneous culture. Besides personal factors like one's own knowledge of a different cultural tradition and his/her own idiosyncrasies in translation, the translation or interpretation of a foreign literary work is interfered with what Hans-Georg Gadamer called "prejudice." But this prejudice, according to Gadamer, is "not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that interpreted they inevitably distort the truth ... In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices ... are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something—whereby what we encounter says something to us" (9). Thus on the one hand misreading is the result of "pre-understanding" or the "historicity" of interpretation and on the other hand it derives from the reality being experienced. More important is that literary misreading can contribute to literary innovations and the more heterogeneous a different culture, the more potential there is for innovations. For instance, the US-American poet Gary Snyder is famous both for his own creations of poetry and for his translation of the poems of Han Shan, a Chinese monk poet in the ninth century. In the "Afterword" of his book *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*, he discloses the connection between doing Chinese poetry translation (that is often not a "faithful" work) and making his own poetry writing. Perhaps a more compelling example is Ezra Pound who was thought to be misled by Ernest Fenollosa's misunderstanding of the nature of the Chinese language (see Kennedy). But it is the very misreading—or even double misreading—that enables Pound to find his "ideogrammic method" in creating poems. This is why Yunte Huang maintains that imagism in US-American literature was "born out of the encounter between the West and the East" (15). Interestingly, Pound's misreading of Chinese literature exerts reversely influence on modern Chinese poetry. According to Xiaomei Chen, 朦胧 (*menglong*) poetry by

modern Chinese poets between 1978 and 1983 is based on a misunderstanding of both Western modernism and Pound by some Chinese poets. Therefore, while some sort of variation can be called "misleading variation," literary translation in many other cases may result in variation that can produce a positive consequence.

This positive variation can be understood better if we take translation into consideration. As we know, in the history of translation there are mainly two traditions. One is the linguistic tradition that puts emphasis on transformation of languages and transmission of information while the other puts translation—especially the translation of literature—in the limelight of a larger cultural and social context. For the linguistic tradition, equivalence between the source text and the target text is always preferred. However, the cultural tradition in descriptive translation studies, target-oriented translation studies, the polysystem approach, and manipulation theory holds a dynamic and systemic view of translation. In this respect, with efforts launched by scholars like James S. Holmes, Andre Lefevere, Susan Bassnett, Itamar Even-Zohar, etc., translation studies has experienced a "cultural turn," which has opened a new door not only for translation studies, but also for comparative literature in dealing with the "traveling" of literature to a different culture. In regards to the study of dissemination and reception of Chinese literature, therefore, external factors which may influence translation and reception cannot be ignored because they often cause a reception of "betrayed" Chinese literature. Hence I argue that the study of literature across China and the English-speaking world has to take into account the phenomena of variation caused by different determinants: cultural tradition, ideology, readership, idiosyncrasy of the translator, etc.

Other than translation, the imagination and attitude of the readership in the English-speaking world towards a foreign culture may decide reception. Since a foreign culture's image is a kind of "mirage" or a "social collective imagination," imagology should be placed in the field of variation studies. Take *topos* or cliché as example, Chinese people used to call US-Americans as 美国佬 ("Yankees" in the derogative sense) and Japanese as 日本鬼子 ("Japs" or "Japanese devils") for some historical reasons, which obviously are the result of the Chinese collective imagination. In terms of variation, imagology hinges upon imagination that shifts "representational imagination" to "creative imagination." In other words, the image of the "Other" is not the product of representation; instead, it is the product of a mixture of the subject and object, emotions and thought, and has experienced a process of construction. If we check post-mid-nineteenth century Western literary works, for example, we find the appearance of Chinese people been much emphasized: Chinese men usually wear *qipao* (which is women's stress), with an umbrella or fan in the hand, the Chinese are yellow-skinned with narrow eyes, etc. As we know today, the varied image of the Chinese reflects merely the prejudiced imagination by the West. In today's reception of Chinese literature, this kind of prejudice or mirage can still be found. For example, in 2008, *长恨歌* (*The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*) written by the contemporary Chinese writer Anyi Wang was published in by Columbia University Press. The book was soon reviewed as a masterpiece and introduced with praises by the mainstream media in the U.S. and the United Kingdom and it was even featured on the 2011 shortlist for the prestigious Man Booker International Prize. But in many of the reviews made by the media and readers in the U.S., *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* is interpreted as a story about the nostalgia for Shanghai as a past colony. The author herself, however, is indeed embarrassed with this kind of Orientalist interpretation and thinks this is a "symbolic" imagination (see, e.g., Wu).

Since the 1980s, thanks to endeavors made by scholars including Michel Cadot, Yves Chevreil, Joep Leersen, Jean-Marc Moura, Daniel-Henri Pageaux, etc., imagology has exerted a great influence in comparative literature studies (although mostly in Europe and not in the U.S.). In China, scholars like Hua Meng and Ning Zhou, among others, have made imagology also a promising field of comparative literature. Since it is more meaningful to seek the mechanisms of variations of images in another country in a specific time and space, variation theory can lead the study of image to a newer and larger domain. Take Chinese literature for instance: in both Chinese literature and literatures in the English-speaking world, there are large amounts of texts in which various descriptions of foreigners/foreign countries can be found. So we may either study the image of China and Chinese people in a single work or—and this is more meaningful in my opinion—study the production, circulation, conventionization, and variation of images constructed by the English-speaking world in a specific historical period.



When Chinese literature travels into the English-speaking world, it has virtually crossed different cultures. As we know, the concept of culture cannot be modeled on a single pattern, be it under the label of "Eurocentrism," "modernity," or anything else—there is no "culture" but only cultures in the plural. In the nineteenth century especially in German-language scholarship a distinction was made between "culture" and "civilization." Admittedly, the difference between "civilization" and "culture" is complicated and people use them in various and sometimes contradictory contexts. In my opinion, it is useful to make a clarification—"Based on the pattern of civilization in the contemporary world, it is obvious that heterogeneity and irrelevance account for a large proportion. Therefore, research should be started from the heterogeneity of civilization, not just from the heterogeneous culture under the same civilization framework" (Cao, *The Variation* 231). The key for a cross-civilization perspective is to understand the basic discursive rules and theoretical discourses in different civilizations, which are embodied with theories, aesthetics, literature, or all combined. Thus we can have a better empathy and appreciation of the dissimilation and reception of literature in a different country. Comparatists, therefore, cannot shun discursive rules, especially heterogeneous rules, in studying the reception of Chinese literature in the English-speaking world. Another phenomenon of variation that occurred frequently in the "traveling of literature" is domestication, which happens when variations caused by different languages and cultures are assimilated by the recipient country. The process of assimilation can be called "domestication" (or "localization" or "Chinization" on the part of China). The opposite of the process is "foreignization" (or "Westernization" on the part of China, East, or the Third World). Variations may not necessarily result in domestication since it can only happen when the inner discursive rules or theoretical discourses have been transformed after cultural filtration, translation, and reception. Therefore, it is important to explore how and to what degree the discursive rules and theoretic discourses of Chinese literature have been changed or have become a part of literary or cultural tradition in the English-speaking world.

Domestication may take place on the level of literary works: it can be used to deal with translated literature. As we know, literary translation is different from other types of translation in that it deals with artistic texts featuring aesthetical delicacies. The representation of the source text in a different language is to a large extent a literary creation or, as Walter Benjamin called it, an "afterlife" (16). China's modern history has witnessed many great translators who introduced foreign literary works into China by the means of domestication. Take Lin Shu for example. He is famous for his introducing Western literature to a whole generation of Chinese readers in the early twentieth century. Despite his ignorance of any foreign language, he collaborated with others to translate eventually more than 180 works of Western literature, most of which are novels. As one of the earliest to translate Western literary texts into Chinese, Lin translated with the medium of literary Chinese that was still the main language of Chinese literature at that time. Lin's translations are special in that the strategies of cultural adaption including deletion, addition, and modification can be found in nearly all of his translated works. This is why some scholars criticized him for not doing a "real" translation, but merely "rewriting." But in recent decades Lin has been viewed one of the early founders of the genre of translated literature which anticipates and stimulates the coming-up of the modern narrative discourse of Chinese literature. From the perspective of domestication, Lin's translated works have become a part of Chinese literature. In the same way, the translation of Chinese literary texts can also use the method of domestication. For the classic Chinese novel *红楼梦* (*The Dream of the Red Chamber*), there are different English translated versions, but only one—*The Story of the Stone* translated by David Hawkes—has become a really popular version among English speakers. The fluent and English-style language adopted by the translator has made the Chinese classic become a popular book. In contrast, another version done by Hsien-yi Yang and Gladys Yang, two translators in China, is faithful to the original Chinese classic, but is little known in the English-speaking world today. Therefore, in a large sense, Hawkes's *The Story of the Stone* has become a part of literature in the English-speaking world. In this regard, translation, with variations available, can help the original work achieve a rebirth in another culture and at the same time can seed new expressions, new thought, and new horizons in the literary tradition of another country. In modern Chinese literature, for example, we can find many ideas or images are shared by the Western literature via translation. As Lydia H. Liu puts it, "Since the modern intellectual tradition in China began with translation, adaptation, appropriation, and other interlingual

practices related to the West, it is inevitable that this inquiry [of translingual practice] should take translation as its point of departure" (25).

Domestication can also take place in the aspect of literary theory. We can take the development of modern Chinese literary theory as the case in point. In the late nineteenth century Chinese culture was for the first time confronted with Western cultures in an all-around manner. Having witnessed the "power" of the West, Chinese scholars called upon to seek a new voice from alien lands for Chinese literature. Following this way Chinese literature has experienced great variations in both theories and practices. Thus there were two directions for Chinese literary theory: either to imitate the "voice" of the West or to stick to its tradition while adding new "voices." Unfortunately, modern Chinese literary theory has taken the first direction. This situation was reinforced by another wave of the abrupt influx of Western theories in the 1980s and 1990s. Then the rest of the story is clear: modern Chinese literature has been transformed or, as we say, is "subverted" by Western literary discourses. We cannot understand Chinese literature works without the help of Western literary perspectives and are ultimately alienated from ancient Chinese literature and its own literary theories.

In recent years many Chinese scholars begun to reevaluate the "Westernization" of Chinese literature and theoretical frameworks and called attention to the consequence—literary "aphasia" which means the absence of the Chinese "voice" in literary theory and criticism (see Cao, "Aphasia"). Therefore, domestication is both a method and strategy to (re)build Chinese theoretical discourses. As some scholars point out, "literary works of China and the West do share many structures and properties that can accommodate the application of the (appropriately modified) theories from either end of the globe" (Shen 151). In this sense, in my opinion an appropriate way is not "going back," but "looking forward"—that is, the "Chinization" of Western literary theory while focusing on the heterogeneity of Chinese literary traditions and variations in literary exchanges call to develop a Chinese theory of comparative literature. Fortunately, in this undertaking there are already many pioneers, for example Peng-hsiang Chen with *From Thematics to the "Chinese School" of Comparative Literature*, Zhongshu Qian with 管锥编 (The Tube and Awl Chapters), Guowei Wang with 人间词话 (Comments on Ci-Poetry), Yuanhua Wang with 文心雕龙创作论 (On Creation of *The Literary Mind* and *The Carving of Dragons*), Wai-lim Yip with *Comparative Poetics*, Xiaolu Wang with 中西诗学对话 (Dialogue between Chinese and Western Poetics), etc. Unfortunately, Chinese literary theory has by far exerted little influence in the English-speaking world and thus the domestication of Chinese literary theory in the English-speaking world could be a field worthy of comparatists' efforts in the future.

Variation can be also understood as the process of cultural filtration, localization, and domestication, which contributes to the solution to the problem why some translated works done by Chinese scholars are closer or more faithful to the original Chinese works, but stir little response while those works done by the scholars in the English-speaking world have more often than not won great popularity. If we focus too closely on Chinese literature *per se*, variation would be treated as something negative, but in terms of communication and dialog between different civilizations variation has a positive power and hence it is important for Chinese comparatists to discover the causes of different variations in the English-speaking world. On the other hand, it is more important to look for approaches of domestication in order to make Chinese literature easier acceptable to the English-speaking world. However, this does not mean that the heterogeneities of Chinese literature and culture should be sacrificed in the process of domestication.

In conclusion, the perspective of variation can cultivate a new method of studying the dissemination and reception of Chinese literature in a foreign culture: the comparison between Chinese literature studies in China and those in the English-speaking world. Through variations or differences, a point can be reached somewhere between the two. If we understand that variation is an unavoidable and useful concept in literary exchange across heterogeneous cultures, then we would not be afraid of taking gradual steps in promoting the dissemination of Chinese literature in the English-speaking world. As Xie points out, there are two "gaps"—the time gap and the language gap—in the Chinese-Western literary exchange. Time gap means that Western readers have begun to learn Chinese literature on a large scale only in the last few decades while there is a long-time reception of Western literature in China. Language gap refers to the fact that different from the great number of Chinese people proficient in English, French or other Western languages, there are very few people proficient in Chinese in the West ("Problem and Nature" 8-9). Thus, although some Chinese literary texts have been



translated into English by such translators as Howard Goldblatt, Bonnie McDougall, and Michael Berry, there still exists the necessity to promote the translation of Chinese literary texts in order to confront and deal with cultural filtration, misreading, or domestication.

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